

White Paper

Grant Number HAA-256069-17

Title: Networking the Regional Comprehensives

Project Director: Roopika Risam

Grantee Institution: Salem State University

Submitted March 29, 2019

Salem State University proposed a Level I project, “Networking the Regional Comprehensives: Digital Humanities beyond the R1 and SLAC,” for the Digital Humanities Advancement Grants Program. The project initiated a much-needed national dialogue on the role of regional comprehensive universities in the field of digital humanities. The project succeeded at its short term-goal of bringing together national thinkers and digital humanities practitioners from regional comprehensive universities for a strategic conversation on developing a network to facilitate collaboration of regional comprehensive faculty, librarians, and students across the U.S. This short-term goal helped lay the groundwork for continued work towards the long-term goal of activating and growing this network, so regional comprehensive digital humanities practitioners are better suited to share their knowledge and resources with each other and share their expertise with others across a range of institutions, including K12, community colleges, small liberal arts colleges, and research universities.

Regional Comprehensive Survey

To prepare for the summit held in July 2018, we undertook a national survey to identify the issues at stake for regional comprehensive engagement with digital humanities. In Fall 2017, we developed the tool for conducting a survey of digital humanities practitioners at regional comprehensive universities. Based on the suggestions provided in reviews of the proposed grant, we drew on the expertise of our colleagues in the social sciences at Salem State to improve the methodology of our survey, effectively collect the data we needed to better understand the landscape of digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities, and to promote completion of the survey. We sent out the survey to chairs of humanities

departments and libraries at nearly 400 regional comprehensive universities that are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities. At the time of our interim report, we had achieved a response rate of 15%. Subsequently, through follow-up, network-building, and advocacy, our survey elicited a response from 31% of the institutions, excluding multiple respondents from the same university.

Institutional Profiles

- 76% work primarily with undergraduate students
- 64% had at least one graduate program, typically an MA or MAT in English or History, for an audience of teachers
- 72% commuter vs. 28% residential students
- 53% average graduation rate
- Average workload breakdown of Teaching: 40%, Service 40%, Research 20%

Digital Humanities Pedagogy

- 22% engagement with digital humanities
- 79% engagement through a single assignment, 6% through digital humanities course, 5% outside of class
- 88% incorporate technology in the classroom (primarily videos, Google Docs)
- 94% valued or highly valued using technology while working with students
- 63% reported high access to computer labs and internet on campus
- 41% reported high access to computers and internet for students off campus
- Resources used to keep up with developments in digital humanities: *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *ProfHacker*, *Digital Humanities Now*

Digital Humanities Professional Development

- 12% report access to professional development for digital humanities on campus
- 63% would attend a professional development workshop on digital humanities on campus or virtually
- 61% would attend a workshop on digital humanities at a conference or event
- 34% would attend a week-long summer institute on digital humanities
- Resources needed: hearing about how others are using digital humanities with regional comprehensive students, sample assignments that work for regional comprehensive students, people to talk to
- 62% are likely to participate in a website or online community to share resources, ideas, assignments, and develop strategic collaboration or partnerships

Institutional Infrastructure

- 4% have a digital humanities center
- 16% have an administrator, staff member, or librarian whose role it is to work with digital initiatives
- Primary institutional obstacles: time, money, student interest, available student time outside of class
- External relationships: local cultural heritage communities, K12 schools

The data from our survey additionally provided important insights on the characteristics of digital humanities practices at regional comprehensive universities. Specifically, we were able to extrapolate three models of digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities. In order of prevalence, these three models are the lone wolf model, the library model, and the proto-center model.

The Lone Wolf Model

In the Lone Wolf model, one person is solely undertaking digital humanities initiatives at the regional comprehensive university. This person is typically a professor, though sometimes a librarian is doing this work instead. As far as they know, this person is the sole digital humanities practitioner at their institution. This may or may not be the case. The emphasis on teaching and service for faculty and service to faculty and students for librarians at regional comprehensive universities produces a silo-ing effect. Without a culture of sharing knowledge, faculty tend to remain on campus to teach 4 or 5 classes and hold offices hours and leave. Thus, it is entirely possible there are others doing digital humanities at their institutions but it is difficult to find them.

The primary challenge of the lone wolf model is that a single person has to manage all of the factors of undertaking a digital humanities project on their own. At a Research 1 institution or elite small liberal arts college, this might involve a team. To quote one of the respondents, “I must be my own project director, R&D, project manager, and IT support if I want to undertake digital humanities projects. I do, so I roll with it, but it limits what I can accomplish.”

Clearly, this is not a sustainable model for several reasons. It relies on an individual person, so if they leave, burn out, or go on sabbatical, the digital humanities initiative goes with them. This seems to be of little concern to institutions, since they have not made an investment in digital humanities (and, often, the institutions were not looking to make one). The lone wolf role tends to be one taken on voluntarily, not through an institutional mandate for a digital humanities program. The lone wolf model is thus one that may be fundamentally exploitative –

undertaken on personal initiative, outside of one's job function. Moreover, how or whether this work is "counted" is a primary issue. In this context, projects are often taken in a pedagogical context and may also be faculty or librarian research, but there is also a component of service, and there are no satisfactory mechanisms for adequately capturing this confluence. This phenomenon is not unique to regional comprehensive universities, but in a context where, for example, 4/5ths of a job is teaching and 1/5th is research, service, and advising, the lone wolf works well-beyond job description or compensated time. This is particularly disconcerting as research demands at regional comprehensive universities are climbing, without attendant adjustment of teaching load or other responsibilities.

The Library-based Model

In the library-based model, loose amalgamations of collaborating librarians are leading digital humanities projects. While these projects are sometimes pedagogical in nature, they are more often in relation to archives and include collaboration with archivists, specifically on digitization projects. In the latter case, when they include work with students, it is often work with individual students – typically work-study students – rather than in the context of a class. This work is often undertaken with the goal of trying to relieve a labor burden on the archivist. As one respondent noted, "In response to an important centennial, our archives were receiving requests for materials and our sole archivist couldn't keep up. So, we worked together to digitize materials from that collection, to avoid the litany of requests." Sometimes, these digital humanities initiatives are undertaken in relationship with community partners: local cultural heritage communities, churches, cultural groups, and societies. Generally, respondents

reported that these initiatives were supported and encouraged by library administration. To some extent, they were encouraged by wider university administration, particularly in contexts where there may be opportunities to engage in fundraising, improve town-gown relations, or cultivate community partners, often for institutional advancement.

According to respondents, in this library model, the work is valued, understood as part of job descriptions within the context of a regular work week, and countable in tenure and promotion reviews – primarily as service. While it is certainly positive that respondents report this support, there is also the matter that the intellectual leadership of their work is not adequately captured in the category of “service.” This presents a particular challenge for librarians whose institutions expect research as well, since the digital humanities projects themselves are often not evaluated as a product of research. Rather, they must go to a conference to present on a project or write an article or book chapter about the project to have it “count” as research. This is a phenomenon that may sound familiar to anyone whose job has an expectation of research and does digital humanities projects. Librarians at regional comprehensive universities are often expected to do this without being given any research days or research leave, in an environment where student-to-librarian ratios are growing as budget cuts leave vacancies unfilled. The prospect of being given that research time is bleak, as libraries are looked to as “cost centers” rather than revenue generators.

There is a subset of this model, which is one where the faculty expect the librarians to do digital humanities projects for them. Citing the “service” nature of this role, many of the respondents have, in fact, done the projects – often without credit, always without compensation (beyond the ability to include it in tenure and promotion reviews as “service”).

This is a phenomenon that has been well documented by Miriam Posner, Stewart Varner, Micah Vandegrift, Trevor Munoz, and others, in the context of research universities, and is one that is similar for regional comprehensive universities.

The Proto-center Model

The third variant is the “proto-center” model, an entity that is not formally recognized as a center but operates through cross-unit collaboration involving faculty, librarians, and sometimes administrators. In institutions with the proto-center, the library is often the “home” of the entity and library administration tends to be the advocate for it to upper administration. Leadership of the proto-center includes librarians, faculty, administrators, or some combination of the three. Activities of proto-centers typically include hosting speakers, organizing workshops, working with faculty to support digital humanities projects in classes, convening learning communities or working groups to bring together faculty and librarians interested in digital humanities projects, and running undergraduate research or internship programs to give students experiences with digital humanities.

While these activities may seem reminiscent of those undertaken by digital humanities centers, they have, at best, a half-hearted institutional mandate or commitment. As a respondent noted, “We do it all. We just do it with no money.” In some cases, faculty in leadership positions may be compensated with a course release or a semester, while others borrow time from their workloads. Librarians in leadership positions are typically uncompensated and rarely reduced from other job functions – with the exception of digital

initiatives librarians, for whom digital humanities is often part of their (very large) job descriptions.

Nor is the proto-center a sign of impending institutional commitment. Rather, it is a liminal space without a budget or staff of its own, carved out through good will, borrowed time, and funding eked out from other budgets. Thus, the proto-center, while seeming like it should be a more sustainable way forward for digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities, still encapsulates most, if not all, of the other challenges from the other models of digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities.

Networking the Regional Comprehensive Summit

We used the results of the survey to inform planning of the Networking the Regional Comprehensives Summit, held at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts from July 10-13, 2018. The summit brought together leaders in digital humanities at regional comprehensive universities around the United States to share their successes and challenges developing digital humanities initiatives in their local university contexts. The assembled group also looked carefully at points of contact and similarities between their work and developed plans for building a network of regional comprehensive practitioners to leverage our resources and do outreach to practitioners at other universities. Attendees were: Kirk Anne (SUNY – Geneseo), Elisa Beshero-Bondar (University of Pittsburgh – Greensburg), Lora Del Rio (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville), Lisa Litterio (Bridgewater State University), Pam Mitchem (Appalachian State University), Chuck Rybak (University of Wisconsin – Green Bay), Paul

Schacht (SUNY – Geneseo), and Janneken Smucker (West Chester University), in addition to co-directors Roopika Risam and Susan Edwards of Salem State University.

We began with an overview of survey results and discussion of the relationship between the survey results and our own experiences. Participants found the results generally consistent with their own experiences at regional comprehensive universities, from the needs of our student populations to the challenges of our faculty and librarians to the models of digital humanities in operation at our universities. Paul Schacht and Kirk Anne then presented on their work at SUNY – Geneseo, which highlighted the integration of digital humanities into classroom pedagogy as well as collaboration between faculty and technologist. Lora Del Rio spoke about collaboration and librarianship in digital humanities, emphasizing embedded librarianship and the challenges and affordances of faculty and librarian collaboration on digital humanities projects. Elisa Beshro-Bondar addressed the curricular developments around digital studies that she has spearheaded at Pitt-Greensburg, sharing her insights on how to increase faculty buy-in and collaboration for digital humanities initiatives. Pam Mitchem discussed her work building a digital scholarship program at Appalachian State University, which covered a range of topics, from grant funding to community partnerships to intra-library collaboration. Susan Edwards discussed our work building digital initiatives Salem State University, focusing on finding and repurposing existing university resources and structures for funding and infrastructure. Lisa Litterio discussed her efforts to engage colleagues with digital humanities through digital rhetoric and writing in the classroom, as well as collaborating with administrators. Finally, Chuck Rybak presented on pedagogical methods for digital humanities, using project suites and also brought his experience as a dean to the conversation as well.

In addition to talks and robust discussions that followed, attendees participated in a number of exercises intended to surface and begin strategizing about how to address the needs of digital humanities practitioners at regional comprehensive universities. These included group note taking and synthesizing; conversation reflections; an assessment of what we have, need, and want; and small-group brainstorming based on the assessment. From these activities, we drafted a “Statement of Empowerment” articulating the unique value of digital humanities practitioners at regional comprehensive universities, to reframe the conversation as one not about the deficits of regional comprehensive universities but the opportunities. We also conducted an in-depth analysis of existing models of digital humanities networks to identify what would work most effectively in our context.

The conclusion and outcome of this work was that without the funding that other networks have been able to gather, from affiliated institutions and funders like the Mellon Foundation, we had to identify the minimal viable support needed for sustainability. The best approach, we identified, is to build on the strategies we have already been using: leveraging personal networks, social media, and piggybacking on existing structures to continue making connections; share syllabi, assignments, and curricula; and organize birds of a feather events for regional comprehensive digital humanities practitioners at the conferences we attend.